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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Papanikolaou, V., Roussakis, Y., & Tzionas, P. (2020). The influence of political power and ideology on quality evaluation policies in higher education. *Journal of Contemporary Education Theory & Research*, 4(2), 26-34. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4256783>

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The influence of political power and ideology on quality evaluation policies in higher education

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Abstract

Purpose: The diversity of political views provides great opportunities for sound evaluation methods in higher education, since these are defined, enacted upon and funded through governmental processes; their implementation is constantly subjected to political pressures –This paper explores how results are evaluated as intended to occur many years after implementation of education policy and what is the role of critical political institutions such as accountability and transparency.

Methods: We present as a case study the evolution of evaluation concepts in Greek universities, through a 35-year period, characterized by the shifting of political power. These observations are generalized by the results of interviews conducted with an international group of academics.

Results: There is a strong link between political power and ideology and the determination of quality evaluation, leading to distinct and different outcomes, as implemented in national strategies for higher education, strongly affecting HEI's in all aspects.

Implications: In this paper we show how the state political control shapes the context of QA in universities. Universities must have the courage to protect their core values, democracy, transparency, accountability and the creation of knowledge.

Keywords: education policy, quality assurance, higher education

JEL Classification: I23, I28

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1 INTRODUCTION

The modern word ‘*Political*’ is derived from the Greek word pertaining to the polis (city). The most important task for the politician is, in the role of lawgiver (nomothetês), to establish the appropriate constitution for the city-state. This involves enduring laws, customs, and institutions (including a system of moral education) for the citizens (Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy 2017). The notion of politics is complicated and has many aspects. Politics is referring to a realistic form of law, involving compromise and conciliation (Leftwich,

2015). As diverse conceptions of political issues and cultures arise, emphasis is given to the impact of economic theories that are influencing them; for example, Fukuyama (1989) demonstrates the existence of the strong bonds that connect liberal economics with liberal politics.

The politics of governance in higher education are dominated by a discourse on quality assurance which assumes the external regulation of academic activity to be the natural state of affairs. As part of the continuing power struggle for control over the regulation of high status knowledge, Quality Assurance (QA) combines technical and bureaucratic elements with actual values, in various proportions. As an

ideological framework, QA is comprehensive in its scope, flexible in its presentational form, and capable of legitimizing an ambitious alliance of both existing and emergent groups in the politics of higher education (Salter and Tapper 2000). In European Higher Education Area, the role of university is underpinned by some fundamental and core values such as: promotion of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, cross-border education, enhancing accountability, encouraging diversity, integrating refugees, promoting democratic principles, contributing to sustainable development, upholding research integrity and ethics (Altbach and Knight, 2007; EUA, 2019). In this context the 'demand' for quality international education and a legitimate accreditation process, through mechanisms that are acceptable by all and at the same time capable of maintaining a balance between the diverse stakeholder interests, is increased. Diverse expectations and experiences of various stakeholder groups, both at national and international level, are posing a serious challenge for QA in HE (Beerens and Udam, 2017). The existence of heterogeneous students' populations and academic staff contribute a different perspective in the conversation about quality.

As it was widely argued that higher education should be properly regulated to ensure the efficient use of public funding, the state had to evolve a system of governance that could respond through specific accountability arrangements (Salter and Tapper, 2000). Thus, QA can be viewed as a matter of society's political priorities (Morley, 2003). The role of QA is to enhance the bond between universities, the state and the stakeholders (if such a bond exists), by promoting their engagement and by setting accountability measures (Harvey and Green, 1993). Universities must be accountable to all possible stakeholders for all aspects of their operation, i.e. teaching, learning, effective management and productivity issues, the effective use of public resources, in order to satisfy the expectations of students and parents, while at the same time performing ethical and relevant research (Houston and Paewai, 2013).

However, QA could be misused if it simply perceived as a system of exerting control for implementing state policies. In such cases, if QA is not considered as a comprehensive or valid tool that represents true quality, it could become a control mechanism that abuses power (Harvey 2004). A clear metaphor for such a case is depicted in a unique way in the dialogues of Humpty Dumpty, in the book *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, e.g.:

-*'When I use a word', Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less'.*

-*'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'*

-*'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be Master — that's all.'*

Here the author L. Carroll seems to mock both the educational techniques as well as the morals of a system that promotes appearances and serves the authorities instead of focusing on true quality (Brooker, 2004).

The aim of this paper is: i) to highlight how the ideological, political, social and economic environment affects the development of QA procedures, ii) to examine how the increased state control, exercised according to the prevailing

political ideology, defines and shapes the concept and the context of QA, iii) how the excessive state control could manipulate the mechanisms of quality and undermine traditionally university values as autonomy, accountability and academic freedom, instead of acting as a balancing factor between institutions. As an extended case study, we present an in-depth study of the progress of QA procedures in Greek universities for a period of 35 years, operating under three major law reform frameworks, and we try to show how QA is becoming a critical matter on the political agenda and how political power was used to define and shape the meaning of quality in different eras. Additionally, by conducting a number of structured interviews with an international group of academics, our observations are generalized, helping us to demonstrate the political dimension of QA internationally. Overall, it is shown how certain bureaucratic mechanisms adopted by the state together with the economic hegemony exerted by some influential stakeholders can define and shape the context of QA in accordance to specific political or ideological orientations.

2 QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION AS A POLITICAL PROCESS

Universities have the significant authority to shape the education of the future citizens of societies and be the key drivers of knowledge societies, also to act upon the social-political- economic structures and change them in a life-long circle. These complex functions are increasing the strength, influence and correlation they have with the society as a whole and also they render them accountable and autonomous. QA, perceived both as an ideology and as a technological method (Yingqiang, and Yongjian, 2016) is one of the most important ways for the university to promote transparency and accountability. This process is not an apolitical or innocuous one; on the contrary it is highly politicized and intrusive (Harvey, 2004). There can exist systemic structures imposed by central authorities that define the meaning and the implementation of 'quality procedures'. In this sense, QA provides a mechanism for advancing a range of political agendas and actually increasing control over universities (Houston and Paewai, 2013).

Historically, in Europe, the Bologna Declaration in 1999 adopted QA as one the main pillars of European Higher Education Area (EHEA). A number of new agencies and organizations were formed, with their principle aim to establish a quality assurance framework and with some of them being directly depended or semi-depended to the respective governmental authorities. The European Association for Quality Assurance is the leading organization representing all the quality assurance organizations in EHEA members (EUA, 2018). These organizations define the framework, the agenda and the procedures for QA and, they actually legitimize it by designing the mechanisms and selecting the indicators which measure quality. Additionally, the role of evaluators is becoming increasingly important as different disciplines have different conceptions of quality and the selection of the 'experts' is based on the purpose of the evaluation itself (Harris-Huermert, 2008).

The politicization of QA procedures and mechanisms are referring:

(1) to micro and macro outlines and frameworks that are associated with the introduction of QA in Higher Education in national and international level (Brady and Bates, 2016; Harvey, 2004; Yingqiang, and Yongjian, 2016),

(2) to the role of the government as a '*supervisory*' and '*evaluative*' actor (Csizmadia Enders and Westerheijden, 2008). The state is seen as the dominant authoritarian stakeholder in the educational process (Minina, 2017; Oleksenko et al., 2018),

(3) to the role of the market pressures for quality monitoring in HE (Beerens and Udam, 2017; Bostock, 2002; Oleksenko et al., 2018),

(4) to the worldwide growth of international QA Agencies with a dominant methodology (Harvey, 2004; Salto, 2018),

(5) to its academic '*acceptability*' in educational policies and interference (Bostock, 2002; Gallagher, 2018).

(6) to the satisfaction of the variety of stakeholders, with different weighting of their needs (Beerens and Udam, 2017). The stakeholders may adopt diverse perspectives when passing a judgment such as approval, encouragement, critique or even disapproval, at any particular discursive moment of educational operation (Minina, 2017). Additionally when they use QA as a tool, this legitimizes their specific vision or interests (Skolnik, 2010).

The development of QA in European Higher Education Area defines a 'quality culture' as a process of continuous improvement for all (Brady and Bates, 2016). In this sense, the establishment of a student-centered approach to learning and teaching in the higher education domain, increases students involvement and engagement in developing quality assurance procedures even further (Salter and Tapper, 2000; Yingqiang and Yongjian, 2016). Moreover, when students act as educational 'consumers' (Beerens, 2015a) they should be capable of making choices about the quality characteristics of the institution that they choose to study, and they demand valid and reliable information for this reason. This type of 'commodification' of students' choices changes drastically the educational experience of the past (Hoecht, 2006).

2.1 Social origins of Power in defining Quality

According to Foucault (1991), a wide range of rules and settings in a society constitute a common framework that affects all parts of it. Each society has its own regime of truth, its '*general politics*' of truth. Foucault understands power in terms of "*strategies*" which are produced through the concatenation of the power relations that exist throughout society, wherever people interact. (Daldal, 2014). His approach to the notion of power is that it exceeds politics and sees power as an everyday, social and embodied phenomenon, as an act of control and promotion of the norm. In addition, Gramsci (1992) argued that power is established through ideas and knowledge that is expressed with consent, through legitimate societal norms and rules. However, this requires the winning of the 'ideological battle' over the state,

in using the educational and political mechanisms (Daldal, 2014). The resulting '*Cultural hegemony*' is reproduced through media, family, educational institutions and mutual interactions in social forms between them. Weber (1991) on the other hand, argued that every power seeks to awaken and uphold faith in its legitimacy. The concept of legality is central because the effectiveness of the political system depends directly on the degree to which the common demands of the citizens are satisfied.

The above sociological hermeneutic approaches about the forms of power could provide a political interpretation on how QA can be transformed from a theoretical ideological advantage to a detailed institutional regulation plan, and assess its impact on the balance of power between higher education institutes and the state. The values that are shaping the QA system include political power relations, complex mixture of ideologies, specific interest considerations (Yingqiang and Yongjian, 2016) and knowledge within complicated political, economic and social interactions (Houston and Paewai, 2013).

Similarly, authentic quality theory can be considered essentially systemic, attending to the values, the ideology, the purpose and the optimizing performance relative to the aim of the system (Houston and Paewai, 2013). Its legitimacy (moral, pragmatic and cognitive) is directly related with the use of political power that is accepted by the citizens and the institutions.

However, it must be emphasized that QA, as an ideology, embodies conflicting value demands especially because of the increasing role of the stakeholders (Skolnik, 2010). Internal and external stakeholders have different views about the purpose and objectives of quality assurance procedures but also, they share a common idea that QA can be an efficient tool for controlling quality in universities (Beerens and Udam, 2017). In many cases, issues of transparency, trust and autonomy of the university are raised and create political tensions (Hoecht, 2006).

3 QUALITY ASSURANCE UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF THE STATE

The role and contribution of the university to the democratic operation of society and its future vision is considered as one of its most important missions (Gallagher, 2018). The introduction of quality assurance criteria as part of an institution's accountability process, was meant to reflect the value gained by society from public investment in the university and became a widespread practice in Europe and worldwide (Beerens, 2015a). The concept of quality takes different forms under different economic and state policies, aiming at meeting and satisfying social challenges, especially in eras of economic crises.

Relatively recently, a major debate in all philosophical, educational, economic and political spheres has emerged, concerning the advantages and disadvantages of neoliberal ideology (Giroux, 2002). Specifically in the field of higher education, the newly-introduced corporate culture concepts and operations formulate the 'entrepreneurial' university (Kalar and Antoncic, 2015) that brings severe changes in the university's governance, policies, culture and establishes a

wholly new system for quality assurance and accreditation (Bleiklie et al., 2011). The urgent priority given to the improvement of the relations between university and industry and the facilitation of technology and knowledge transfer, as dictated by these higher education policies worldwide, gave rise to new forms of QA. Performativity, outputs, audits and the increasing marketization are the new important indices to be measured whereas, other social or ethical indices fall to second place (Oleksenko et al., 2018). For these purposes, new management techniques for accreditation were introduced (Salto, 2018; Salter and Tapper, 2000). In order to fulfill ‘customers needs’ academics often have to compromise between their own research and teaching interests and those imposed by market forces. All of the above set certain political dilemmas between the core values of the university and its contribution to the democratic quality of public life (Giroux, 2002) on one hand and the commercial interests that call for specific forms of accountability QA procedures, on the other.

In any case, QA in the modern university is not a neutral or ideological free concept, but is a systemic process reflecting a particular power-knowledge regime (Li, 2010). An example of government’s supervision through policy guidance is the QA system in Chinese higher education institutes which is a combination of worldwide trends, in conjunction with domestic socio-economic factors. Institutions are expected by the government to achieve a balanced development of students’ acquisition of knowledge, abilities, and ethical and ideological qualities (Li, 2010:64). Similarly, in Russia, quality in higher education institutions was traditionally viewed as an absolute, non-negotiable, inherent feature of the system, indivisible into proximal components. The absolute notion of quality was implicitly connected with the idea of ‘excellence’ and ‘meeting the highest standard.’ Excellence, in turn, was perceived almost exclusively as an outcome – rather than being process-oriented. (Minina, 2017: 3). In USA on the other hand, quality was based on a political and economic context that called for greater accountability; quality procedures were evident in the strategic management of the institutions, but with the focus put more on efficiency rather than on quality (Rhoades and Sporn, 2002).

Thus, there is a clear need for QA in higher education, i) to act as a balancing factor between autonomy and accountability, ii) as a process that brings confidence and guarantees quality in education. The inevitable involvement of politics is a gradual process that is reflecting how well institutions meet their obligations (Leveille, 2006).

3.1 The role of Organizations and Agencies

The aim of achieving accountable governance in universities through quality assurance, is highly linked to the importance of building strong relations with civic society, strengthening the role of universities as core societal institutions and re-establishing trust between them (Ball 2012; Hoecht, 2006). Key point to the national quality assurance systems, especially at their early creation stage, was the ideological and political viewpoints of the government about their scope and operation (Adamson, 2015). The politicization of higher education increases the demand for accountability of the university and affects its autonomy by creating mechanisms for advancing political agendas and increasing control over

them (Houston and Paewai, 2013). Thus, the state itself is becoming the ultimate authority that decides on quality criteria (Minina, 2017).

The role of organizations and agencies that could prevent political interference of governments and act as sources of legitimation of quality is crucial (Adamson, 2015). In a large majority of higher education systems universities cannot choose which quality assurance mechanisms to apply or how to select a quality assurance agency. QA mechanisms are typically regulated by national policies (OECD, 2018). In a theoretical perspective, higher education quality requires a government intervention for several reasons (Beerens, 2015b), one of the most important being the commitment of the educational process in serving the public good, as in return higher education receives public support (Salto, 2018). Quality is defined in a top-down manner, exercising control and regulation over curriculum development, teaching and research activities.

4 OVERCOMING THE SKEPTICISM IN LEGITIMIZING QUALITY

In a democratically organized university, QA mechanisms should act as the ‘agora’ where all the stakeholders, both internal and external, can engage in a common dialogue on accountability, university quality, improving the pedagogy, overcoming social discriminations, external control and state intervention (Giroux, 2002; Leveille, 2006; Oleksenko et al., 2018). The question is how to render QA procedures legitimate under varying, or even contradicting ideological criteria prevailing during the alternation of political parties of different ideological orientations in government, something that is common in recent years, at least in the Western world. If legitimacy is to be considered as the acceptance of authority and, at the same time, the need to obey its commands, then according to Weber three main sources of legitimacy exist: due to faith in a specific political or social order, i.e. tradition, due to faith to charismatic rulers or due to trust to its legality (Weber 1991 [1918]; 1964). Obviously, this is a purely descriptive interpretation.

On a normative view of legitimacy however, e.g. held by Rawls (1993) and Ripstein (2004), it is directly related to the justification of coercive political power. Whether a political body such as a state is legitimate and whether citizens have political obligations towards it depends, on this view on whether the coercive political power that the state exercises is justified.

Quality assurance procedures cannot be considered as traditionally based on faith nor on charismatic rulers, at least in the short past history. Neither they could be legitimized based on the justification of the respective coercive political power of the state, as governments on the opposite sides of the political spectrum overtook each other in the recent past, at least in the Western countries.

This leads to a weak and vague acceptance of prototypes imported from countries of different quality assurance culture and, eventually, to an attitude of skepticism, irony and even rejection of the narrative of QA and accreditation of universities. A certain critique has been developed on the quality value system itself, situating it as a product of

particular political, historical, or cultural discourses and hierarchies. One could detect all characteristics of a postmodernist view on quality assurance, rejecting the possibility of reliable knowledge and a stable reality, framing quality as arbitrary and subjective.

Obviously, this poses some serious difficulties in examining, discussing and comparing the evolution of quality procedures in different places and in different time periods. A minimum common framework can be adopted to overcome this problem, referring to international agencies and organizations (such as OECD, European University Association etc.) and with respect to the core mission of the university. In this sense QA refers to the monitoring, evaluation or review of higher education institutions in order to establish stakeholders' confidence. Furthermore, it has to do with accountability goals, quality enhancement and transparency purposes, as well as with the creation of trust between the institutions and the society and it is considered not only as a technical tool but a process with strongly political influences (Beerens, 2015a). Such a framework should include the core values of:

- (1) institutional autonomy
- (2) public accountability
- (3) creation and transfer of knowledge
- (4) academic freedom
- (5) freedom of expression and
- (6) effective management

It is under this prism that we will try to elaborate the following two case studies that highlight and verify the dependence of QA procedures on political power and ideology.

5 QUALITY ASSURANCE DIMENSIONS IN GREEK HIGHER EDUCATION LAW REFORMS

In order to highlight the key issues that exist, with respect to the purposes of QA in higher education, a period of thirty-five years of operation of the Greek universities is examined, operating under three different reform laws. Each one of these laws reflects the social, political, economic and technological environment of its associated era. The university is considered as a multifaceted social institution with strong interactions with many and diverse sectors of society (Stamelos and Kavasakalis, 2011). In Greece, Higher Education is provided, according to the Constitution, by self-governed, legal entities which are supervised by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs and it is mainly funded by the state.

5.1 Quality Assurance in the 1268/1982 law reform

The concept of QA as part of the educational system firstly appears in the law reform of Law 1268 established in 1982, as part of the university's accountability obligation to society. The aim of the 1268/1982 law reform was to restore the role of the university as a main social institution and as a pillar of democratization, by re-establishing the trust in the institution of the university, while at the same time seeking to connect the university with society. According to its explanatory report, Law 1268/1982 treated the university as a political institution that had to be democratized and integrated into

society in its wider democratization context, for which reason it considers that decision-making by the governing bodies is an act full of political meaning and not a mere technocratic one. Therefore, QA was integrated as an objective for the educational policies.

Law 1268 introduced the "*National Council for Higher Education*" (NCHR), which comprised social, economic and trade union organizations for the first time and had a voice and role in running the university. However, the council decisions were of an introductory rather than decisive or executive character, coming from a body outside of the university. The same was true for the "*National Academy of Literature and Sciences*" (EAGG) whose role was also advisory, focused on teaching and postgraduate studies.

In spite of the principle aim of this reform, many issues such as internal regulatory laws, budget and funding, the allocation of funds, the approval of new faculty positions, and so on were still not decided by the university alone but they required the approval of the Ministry of Education. That had direct effects on QA and resulted in growing a strong resistance against any attempt of developing QA mechanisms and procedures within the institutions. One could say that QA, as introduced by Law 1268/1982, was of only a modest form, as it was considered an innovative characteristic exclusively for the operational management of the university. As the country only a few years ago came out of a real dictatorship, the priorities for effective management and operational techniques came only in second place, after the wish for democratization, free expression and the provision of civil rights to all. There was not yet any room for QA associated with effective performance measures.

The time period until the next major educational reform was characterized by sparse and fragmented policies and attempts by the Ministry of Education to establish a 'quality culture' in higher education. Greece, as a full member of the European Union, had to respond to the quality assurance initiatives set by European directives. It was only in 2005 that a one-time, nationwide evaluation process was carried out, in line with the Bologna directives. Until then, Greek higher education institutes were absent from any national or European performance monitoring and evaluating system; the only 'evaluation' in which some universities actually participated voluntarily was carried out in the context of the 'Institutional Evaluation Programme' covering a period from 1999 to 2005 (Papadimitriou and Westerheijden, 2011).

5.2 Quality Assurance in the 4009/2011 law reform

The first official QA system for Universities in Greece was established by law in 2005, with the intent to support higher education institutions in their efforts to continuously improve their quality and to advise the government on the necessary actions and policies to be taken to that end. At the same time, it aimed to improve transparency and accountability of the Greek higher education system. However, it did not contain any accreditation characteristics, nor did it rank or grade the Greek higher education institutions. The Hellenic Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency (ADIP) was established as the only qualified body for implementing the national policy for QA in Greek Higher Education. The state exerted control in QA procedures through the '*political*' dimension of ADIP (a critical parameter in understanding the role of

ADIP is the fact that the majority of board members of ADIP were appointed by the government). Obviously, this had a significant impact on the autonomy of the Greek universities. ADIP had the political power to legitimize political control and regulation over universities in the interest of the prevailing political ideology while, at the same time, the steering capacity of ADIP was affected by the European dimensions of QA. The European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) defined QA policies that took priority over the influence of the national policies.

It was during 2011 that Greece found itself deep into a financial crisis and universities strangled to respond to their vision and mission and, eventually, were led into a crisis of values created by their outdated political and organizational structures. Public universities suffered from severe budget cuts as state funding was drastically reduced. Additionally, the increased demand for higher education by an increased proportion of students was not only a simple response to the growing demands for employment but it also portrayed the population's higher social and cultural expectations.

The political discourse on the new educational reform on higher education, as introduced in 2011 by the framework Law 4009, was dominated by the need for increasing the quality and the efficiency of the operation system of the universities. There was now a clear emphasis put on effectiveness issues (Saiti et al., 2018). The reform demanded by all higher education institutions to establish an internal quality assurance system. The role of ADIP in evaluating the overall institutional QA systems and in the final accreditation of the institutions and their respective programmes of study became even stronger. On the other hand, the institutions were enabled for the first time to devise (relatively predictable) strategies in order to upgrade their academic status and attain further funding. Priority was given on improving performance measures and audits. Higher education seemed now to be redefined as more market-oriented by adopting '*New Public Management*' techniques in its own governance. However, contemplating the university in terms of producing 'products' to be 'consumed', raised a great deal of critique and skepticism about the actual goals of higher education (Kalar and Antoncic, 2015; Souvlis and Gounari, 2019).

The new conceptual framework for QA (internal quality assurance certification systems, performing internal and external evaluations) was restricting the role of state supervision and enhanced the autonomy of institutions. For the first time with Law 4009, reference was made to the notion of academic "*excellence*" and this was linked to the funding of research in universities. Greek universities participated in international rankings and used their position to attract students, research programs and become partners in international collaborations. Furthermore, Law 4009/2011 proposed for the first time the merging of specific departments or even of whole universities, as well as a change in their governance, according to the needs of the 'national economy' (Zmas, 2015).

Many of the provisions of this law have never been implemented in practice. The main reason was the reaction and opposition expressed by organized groups whose interests were affected. A year later came the first amending. A large critique was also made to the role of ADIP in the so

called 'Athena plan' that proposed the merging of specific departments or of whole universities, as well as a change in their governance, according to the guidelines presented in international reports (OECD, 2018).

5.3 Quality Assurance in the 4485/2017 law reform

On September 2015 the parliamentary elections in Greece put a left-wing party in power, after a snap election over a new bailout deal with international creditors. In 2016 the country was faced with the highest unemployment rate in the EU. More than seven years of recession put one in three Greeks to live in a situation at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

Within this historical context and as part of the results of the '*National Dialogue on Education*' (held by the Ministry of Education in the period 2015-2016), in August 2017 a new legislative regulatory framework was introduced, namely Law 4485, outlining new procedures for the operation of universities. The implementation of this reform was facilitated by the financial crisis and caused intense debates about the role and mission of the universities (Zmas, 2015). The law reform of 4485/2017 sought to stand critically against the New Public Management ideas (Bleiklie et al., 2011) that were introduced by the 4009 law. The major critique was that the values of academic freedom, autonomy and accountability should not be disregarded in favor of efficiency and governmental control through quality assurance and evaluation practices. Otherwise, the public and democratic character of the university is undermined, while humanities and social sciences which, by their very nature, cannot attract market interest are marginalized.

Law 4485/2017 retained the QA procedures and evaluation mechanisms as official policy documents, at least in principle, however:

(1) In practice, only self-assessment procedures remained active in universities whereas, external evaluation procedures were disrupted.

(2) Most articles for QA introduced by Law 4009/2011 were silently repealed (rendered inactive).

(3) It abolished the notion of 'Centers of Excellence' introduced by Law 4009/2011, as the government considered that they were never really implemented and the concept of excellence requires a redefinition through an extensive political and social debate.

(4) A new debate was started, fueled mostly by left-wing parties, on the hypocritical and manipulative role of QA that is used solely as a vehicle for the introduction of New Public Management concepts. It is clear that the Marxist perspective on education (Cole, 2019) was greatly enhanced and QA was no longer a priority.

(5) The initial role of ADIP as the national agency for implementing the state policy for QA was neutralized and restricted to simply supporting HEI's in developing their internal QA system.

This was a direct denunciation of the previous educational reform attempted by Law 4009, which was considered to be totally in favor of stakeholders' satisfaction and expectations and stripped of academic quality criteria and democratic operation. For one more time, the state encompasses the structures and the bases through which policies for QA in higher education are formed.

This reform is still on-going and it led to extensive mergers between universities and Technological Educational Institutions (these were similar to the former British Polytechnics) that took place in 2018 and 2019 as a nation-wide educational strategy. This poses one of the most serious challenges to QA procedures in Greek higher education in the immediate future. The second major challenge for QA would be attributed to the massive refugee influxes (Tzoraki, 2019) that exerted pressures to the state for implementing, operating, and organizing specific support for the incomers and, thus, making university facilities and programs more adaptable.

6 AN INTERNATIONAL GROUP OF ACADEMICS INTERVIEWED ON QUALITY ASSURANCE ISSUES

In order to gain a better insight to the way QA is affected from politics, ideologies and state policies, we have conducted a set of structured personal interviews with an international group of fifteen academics coming from nine different countries (Italy, France, Palestine, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Turkey, and United Kingdom). The interviews were carried out in May of 2019.

When the interviewees were asked to identify the results that state interference (by means of any type or ruling bodies outside of the university) would have on the university culture and operation, the following possible problems were reported:

- (1) *'lack of academic freedom, freedom of expression in teaching and research'*
- (2) *'autonomy and democracy could be coming under attack' because of interference outside of university'*
- (3) *'lack of equal study opportunities for all students'*
- (4) *'job insecurity for academic staff'*
- (5) *'quality could diminish and lead to uncertainty in roles and responsibilities'*
- (6) *'lack of freedom of thought'*

A similar set of answers were provided regarding the question whether market forces and consumerism culture push the universities to be as efficient and market-oriented as possible. Also, they mention that a realistic university governance policy should take into consideration the main role of the university which is 'sharing knowledge', creating 'true' citizens and achieving a harmonious balance between the market pressures and the creation of knowledge. On the contrary, only few interviewees responded that the university should be mostly market-oriented or performance-oriented in order to satisfy the expectations of the students to find jobs. It is interesting to note that as far as the role of national or international accreditation organizations is concerned, the interviewees believe that such institutions play a significant role in maintaining university autonomy. However, they suggest that these organizations should be more active in compelling the state to create a more autonomous operating environment for the universities and endorse them in academic matters. One of the interviewees pointed out that the role of these organizations is actually restricted by the universities' dependence on state funding and the business-oriented nature of their governance. Another characteristic answer is the following: "In a utopian state, such an

institution supervising QA would not even be necessary to exist. But being quite far from an ideal situation where quality would be self-imposed, we really need these institutions. They could play a role similar to that of Themis, the goddess of justice in Ancient Greece, in defending quality values and principles".

Finally, with reference to the ways that state control is manifested and imposed, we received the following answers: i) by establishing one-size-fits-all legislations, indiscriminately for all universities without any consideration of their unique characteristics, ii) by passing law amendments that put universities in financially unviable situations with absolutely no benefits, or by waving certain benefits such as free work permits, or even changing their names and identities, iii) by passing law amendments for periodical evaluation from neutral committees in teaching programs and economic audits. All the interviewees pointed out that the states should pay more attention to the vast diversity of existing institutions that is attributed to their local and national characteristics, their differences and orientations.

7 CONCLUSIONS

Who decides? What is decided? What is the purpose? Whom the decision concerns? When it was decided? In this paper we argue that the answers in those questions are deeply related with policies and ideologies and mainly with those who possess the power to define the context of QA in higher education. The power to determine the meaning of words, as Humpty Dumpty implies in 'Alice in Wonderland' lies obviously in the hands of politicians and the role of politics is strategic.

The adaptation of the true meaning of quality in higher education might require a paradigm shift, with a commitment of the universities for the consistency and quality of academic offerings to ensure that programmes are accredited and quality is assured on a regular basis. Universities must have the courage to protect their core values, democracy, transparency, accountability and the creation of knowledge. Obviously, there is a strong link between political power and ideology and the determination of quality evaluation, leading to distinct and different outcomes, as implemented in national strategies for higher education, strongly affecting HEI's in all aspects. Designing a strategy for QA in higher education in order to accomplish change, is a political action and it is heavily dependent on the existing relationships of trust between the state, its citizens and the higher education institutions. Social demands from HEI's increase the expectations of QA (Yingqiang and Yongjian, 2016) that could act as a bridge between institutions and the state, by providing those essential elements that assure that higher education operates with integrity and effectiveness in meeting its missions.

On the other hand, there should be limitations to the reach of QA or whether a more encompassing QA would be beneficial to higher education institutions and society. The possible absurdity of authoritative extremes in quality assurance procedures in higher education institutions may affect vital functions of the HEI's.

Aristotle named '*symmetria*' (appropriated measure) (Postiglione 2019), as one of the chief forms of beauty, alongside order and definiteness. In this sense, a symmetric design of QA could be the main element of engaging both a quality culture in HEI's and a humanist approach to its function.

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SUBMITTED: MARCH 2020

REVISION SUBMITTED: MAY 2020

2nd REVISION SUBMITTED: JUNE 2020

ACCEPTED: JULY 2020

REFEREED ANONYMOUSLY

PUBLISHED ONLINE: 30 OCTOBER 2020